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Performing speech acts among Moroccan EFL advanced learners

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, research studies on communicative competence have increasingly been conducted in the past few decades. The mastery of foreign languages especially English language has been one of the primary concerns of researchers in the field of language learning and teaching (e.g Canale & Swain, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Kasper, 1993; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). These researchers alongside others tried to deal with issues of ELT that have a strong link with the social context. The production of speech acts by non-native speakers is one of these issues. However, few studies on this topic have been conducted in the Moroccan context. The study of how Moroccan EFL learners perform speech acts in English language is overlooked and still at its embryonic stage especially at the university level. Hence, this paper goes profoundly through this issue by investigating fifteen speech acts among the most frequently used ones in the daily life conversations, namely the speech acts of apologizing, inviting, congratulating, adding information, complimenting, introducing, greeting, expressing gratitude, refusing, helping, making suggestions, requesting, offering, criticizing, and complaining. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) were used as the major data collection instruments; they are one of the most powerful methods used in speech act research (Kasper & Dahl 1991). Twelve American native speakers were involved in the study for the sake of using their answers as a reference through which the Moroccan learners' responses were assessed. The present study shed a great amount of light on Moroccan EFL learners' strengths and weaknesses in choosing the appropriate strategies to perform the aforementioned functions. The findings of this study proved that Moroccan EFL learners suffer widely from using the appropriate expressions when they perform these functions. Thus, the present findings pave the ground to reconsider some critical points regarding the gap existing in the learners' communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

Historically, learning and teaching foreign languages have been beneath constant change throughout the phases of developing learning and/or acquiring foreign languages. Starting from the audio-lingual method in 1930s, language was manipulated in terms of mastering the grammatical aspects and emphasized on accuracy more than any other element. Chomsky (1965) developed his theory about language acquisition and analyzed it as a system neutrally without taking into account any extrinsic forces. However, Hymes (1972) reacted upon Chomsky's theory by taking into consideration the social dimension of language. He, then, coined for the first time the concept of *Communicative Competence* which goes beyond the restricted rules of the syntactical and phonological rules of language. He emphasized the pivotal role of the social context in achieving a successful communication. Later on, Canale and Swain (1980) furthered the aforementioned concept by setting three main components. In addition to the grammatical competence which was linked somehow with Chomsky's linguistic competence, and which considers the rules of grammar, phonology, and knowledge of lexical items, they added the sociolinguistic competence, which stresses the social roles of a group of people in a given context, and the strategic competence, which deals with the communication strategies to avoid patterns of communication breakdowns. Canale (1983) added the fourth component called *discourse competence*. The latter is concerned with the intersentential relations and the way they are connected in a discourse to shape a holistic meaning out of a series of sentences.

This development contributed significantly in paving the ground for many researchers to work on numerous issues related to language use. One of the salient fruits of this metamorphosis was Bachman's concept of Pragmatic Competence (1990). Pragmatic competence is equated widely with Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence. According to Bachman's model of *Communicative Language Ability*, language competence is divided into two main components: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The latter was defined by Bachman in terms of sociolinguistic competence which has been mentioned before, and the illocutionary competence which deals with the effects and the forces of utterances on the interlocutor and the way they are interpreted by him/her. Pragmatic competence opened a wide space for researchers to investigate surrounding issues such as socio-cultural knowledge, context knowledge, and speech act knowledge. The latter remains one of the central issues which have gained a great amount of attention in the study of language use. In this respect, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989b; 1) point out that speech acts are "one of the most compelling notions in the study of language use" (cited in Al-Momani, H., 2009, p. 6).

2. Speech act theory

The origins of speech act theory dated back to 1962 by Austin in his famous book *How to Do Things with Words*. According to Austin, utterances indicate actions. In other words, saying an utterance means performing an action. For example, when we declare a marriage (in the appropriate circumstances), it reveals that we are not reporting on a marriage, we are indulging in it (Austin, 1962, p. 6). By the same token, Searle developed speech act theory through several series of books and defined speech acts as "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (Searle, 1969, p. 16). Searle referred to the rationale behind the study of speech acts and declared that:

"The reason for concentrating on the study of speech acts is simply this: all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, word, or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (p.16).

According to Austin (1962), there are three main categories governing the performance of speech acts. First, locutionary act, it refers to the lateral meaning of an utterance. Second, illocutionary act, it has a specific force on the interlocutor. This force is typically conventional (shared by members of a social group) between the speaker and the hearer. Third, perlocutionary act, it is concern with the consequences of the speaker's utterance on the hearer so as to achieve a specific goal by the speaker. For instance, convincing, changing the hearer's mind and so forth.

Based on the abovementioned taxonomies of speech act performance, Searle (1969) went deeply into the analysis of the second category (illocutionary act) and set four main conditions governing the performance of any given speech act called Felicity conditions.

1. Propositional content
2. Preparatory
3. Sincerity
4. Essential (p.66)

Searle provided the following example in the performance of congratulating:

Propositional content	some event, act, etc., E related to hearer	
Preparatory	E is in H's interest and S believes E	is in H's Interest
Sincerity	S is pleased at E	↓
Essential	counts as an expression of pleasure at E	

Furthermore, Searle (1979) classified the illocutionary acts into five categories. These categories were based on his dissatisfaction about Austin's classification of these acts. They were criticized by Searle by their orientation towards classifying English illocutionary verbs rather than illocutionary acts. As a result, Searle suggested the following classification of illocutionary acts:

1. **Assertives:** commit the speaker to the truth of an expressed proposition, e.g. asserting, concluding.
2. **Directives:** they are characterized by their attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something, e.g. ordering, requesting.
3. **Commissives:** they are illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action, e.g. Promising, offering.
4. **Expressives:** are used to specify the psychological state, e.g. Congratulating, apologizing, welcoming.
5. **Declarations:** they suggest that successful performance guarantees that the propositional content corresponds to the world, they bring about some change, e. g. I resign, you're fired.

3. Performing speech acts by non-native speakers

The study of how non-native speakers perceive and perform speech acts has been considered as one of the salient concerns of interlanguage pragmatics. Researchers like Kasper, Blum-Kulka, Bardovi-Harlig alongside others have devoted numerous studies about non-native speakers' use of speech acts. In other words, speech acts have taken a Lion's slice in the field of interlanguage pragmatics. The latter was defined by Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) as "the study of how nonnative-speakers use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in second language" (p.3).

Based on the inspirational ideas and issues of interlanguage pragmatics, the present study was conducted to investigate speech act knowledge among many Moroccan EFL learners. It is worth mentioning that English language is considered as a second foreign language in Morocco.

3.1. Why is it worth investigating Moroccan EFL Learners' knowledge of speech acts?

To answer this question, it is axiomatic to bring to the surface some important aspects about the Moroccan context. First, English is a second foreign language after French which is the first foreign language. Second, most of the Moroccan EFL learners learn English at the age of 14 or 15, because it is taught in the last year in middle school or the first year in high school. Third, it is taught until the baccalaureate degree as a subject as the same as physics, mathematics, biology, and so forth. Then, it has an independent department at the Moroccan universities. That is to say, it is not a language of instruction unless it is selected by learners as their specialty at the university. In addition, English is not used by administrations and media in Morocco. These nuances may seem simple and not of paramount importance, but those factors which distinguish English as a foreign language (EFL) in Morocco rather than being a second language (ESL).

As a result, the findings of this study can have a great potential to benefit largely researchers to anticipate and compare the results in other foreign contexts. Today, the pivotal role of English in many different scopes cries out for hastening the pedagogical interventions in both ESL and EFL contexts.

4. Methods/Instruments

One of the most powerful data collection instruments in speech act research is discourse completion task (DCT). It was declared by Kasper that “the three most widely used types of questionnaire in pragmatics are discourse completion tasks (DCT), multiple choice and rating scale questionnaire” (cited in Spencer, 2008, p. 292). This technique has been used by the famous researchers (Bardovi-Harling & Hartford, 2005; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

According to Kasper, DCTs are of two formats. The closed response formats, on the one hand, which may require a verbal response where a rejoinder is provided to terminate the exchange; the rejoinder can be positive or negative. The open response formats, on the other hand, do not contain a rejoinder or the interlocutor’s answer and/or reaction (Cited in Spencer, 2008, p.293). In a similar vein, Rose (1991, p.53) refers to these two formats as hearer response (i.e. HR DCT), and no hearer response (i.e. NoHR DCT). In this study, the first format was chosen because of two reasons. First, the study was conducted in an EFL context. Thus, it would help the respondents understand the scenarios very well. Second, closed formats help the respondents to have credible interpretations since they provide restricted situations. For instance, Blum-Kulka et al (1989) provide an example of a closed response format as in the following scenario:

Example 1.

In the lobby of a university library, Jim and Charlie have agreed to meet at six o’clock to work on a joint project. Charlie arrives on time and Jim is an hour late.

Charlie: I almost gave upon you!

Jim:

Charlie: O.K. Let’s start working

(Cited in Spencer, 2008, p.292)

Concerning the participants, the study included 100 undergraduate students belonging to the English department at the school of Arts and Humanities in Meknes. These students were chosen randomly out of 331, this sampling represents 30, 21 % of the whole population. Furthermore, the study included also 12 American native speakers. Six of them are teachers at the American language center in Meknes, while others were included based on online communication. It should be noted that these American native speakers were chosen as a reference through which the responses of the Moroccan EFL learners were corrected. In other words, the different responses obtained by the American native speakers on every speech act were listed in a checklist. The latter provided the source upon which the appropriateness of every response was assessed.

It worth mentioning that many students expressed a great excitement towards the discourse completion tasks particularly because of the new nature of this kind of questionnaire for them. Also, they found the different scenarios challenging and helped them react as if they engage concretely in the situation of each function. The present arguments were expressed orally by the students during the collection of the questionnaire.

There were fifteen speech acts included in this investigation. These items were chosen in the light of their widely use in the literature (e.g requests (Hassall 2001; Marquez reiter et al. 2005), expressions of gratitude (Eisenstein and Bodman 1993), Apologies (Garcia 1989; Kasper 1993), complaints (Trosberg 1995), refusal (Gass and Houck 1999; Widjaja 1997)) (cited in Spencer, 2008, p. 290). Also, they were selected on the basis of a survey in which some university professors chose the different speech acts which are used frequently in English language courses. There were 10 professors who participated in this survey out of 33 (30%) at the English department in Meknes. These university professors teach the third-year level at Moulay Ismail University. This survey was considered as a preliminary research to find out the speech acts that occur frequently in the classroom. As a result, the study included the following items: introducing, greeting, requesting, apologizing, complimenting, complaining,

congratulating, adding information, inviting, refusing, offering, helping, expressing gratitude, making suggestions, and criticizing.

Moreover, the analytics software SPSS (Statistical package for the social sciences) was used because of its relevance to classify subtly the different responses obtained by DCTs into percentages.

5. Findings and Discussion

The percentages obtained on each speech act provide concrete arguments regarding Moroccan EFL learners' strengths and weaknesses in performing the aforementioned functions. Table (1) illustrates the percentages obtained on all speech acts.

Following table (1), the respondents produced highly appropriate responses in performing the speech act of congratulating (84%). This is mainly due to the fact that all the respondents used the same term "Congratulations!" The reason behind this success can be justified in two points. On the one hand, congratulating is among the most widely used functions in the everyday life, either in formal or informal contexts. On the other hand, the word "Congratulations" has a significant and easy translated alternative in classical Arabic /tahani:na/ or in Moroccan Arabic /məbrok/ which is used also in classical Arabic. (Patterns of pragmatic transfer are investigated more profoundly in a different article: pragmatic transfer in performing speech acts among Moroccan EFL learners at the university).

Apologizing, introducing, greeting, expressing gratitude, and refusing are functions in which the respondents could obtain results just above the average (56%-67%). Apologizing is called when a specific social norm is violated. The apologizer, thus, aims to decrease the degree of offense by using some mitigating devices (e.g I'm awfully sorry, I'm terribly sorry) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Introducing is one of the primary functions which Moroccan EFL learners learn at middle school and high school. Nevertheless, 59% of the appropriate responses is not a high percentage. This probably indicates that the textbooks which were used earlier to enable the students to perform this function, as it is supposed to be, did not present it adequately (Latif, 2014). This case is similar to the speech act of greeting. It is one of the primary functions, if not the first one that EFL learners generally learn at the earlier stages in their learning process. Based on the fact that it is an indispensable function in pragmatic competence, 56% is not of a good percentage. As a result, serious intervention and more emphasis are strongly recommended for more pedagogical developed models. In a similar vein, expressing gratitude, which is considered as a face-saving act, is an interesting function in terms of strengthening the interpersonal relationships. In this respect, 58% of the responses were appropriate. This is nearly the same as the case with the speech act of refusing. Most of the respondents could produce appropriate expressions in performing refusals 61%, while 39% failed mainly because of a negative pragmatic transfer.

Table (1) The percentages obtained on all speech acts.

Speech acts	Appropriate responses	Inappropriate responses
Congratulating	(84%)	(16%)
Apologizing, Introducing, Greeting, Expressing gratitude, Refusing	(56% - 67%)	(39% - 44%)
Requesting	(41%)	(59%)
Adding information, Complimenting, Helping, Making suggestions, Inviting, Offering	(21% - 33%)	(67% - 79%)

Complaining, Criticizing	(12% - 19%)	(81% - 88%)
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(El Hiani, 2015)

In different results, requesting is among the functions in which the respondents found difficulties to perform appropriately. Only 41% of the respondents could perform appropriately towards this function. Given the fact that requesting is a face-threatening act, it is intrinsically interesting to use some patterns of mitigation to soften the impact of this speech act on the hearer. As a result, the American native speakers tend to use past tenses such as *I was wondering* or the modal verb *would* which is used to express desires or make requests politely. Moroccan EFL learners are not aware, to some extent, of these strategies to soften the degree of threatening the face with their interlocutors. The role of the teacher, in this regard, is crucial in affording the students with the different strategies used to make requests in appropriate ways.

The respondents found more difficulties in performing the speech acts of adding information, complimenting, helping, making suggestions, inviting, and offering. Concerning the speech act of adding information, 70% of the whole responses was inappropriate. This is mainly due to the degree of directness used by the respondents. It was noticed that most of them use direct strategies such as “*I want to add...*” or “*I need to add...*”, while the American native speakers tended to use indirect strategies such as “*Your talk made me think of another idea...*” or “*I have another idea, if you don't mind me adding it*”. In a similar vein, the results obtained on the speech act of complimenting revealed that many of the respondents 67% failed in performing appropriately the aforementioned function. Complimenting has a pivotal role in pragmatic competence, especially in establishing good interpersonal relationships. The majority of the respondents were influenced by a negative pragmatic transfer. In addition to this, the respondents obtained massively low percentage on the speech act of helping 25%. In spite of the important status of this function in the daily life communication, only few respondents could produce appropriate utterances. Accordingly, a great emphasis is needed on furthering new pedagogical models especially on the part of textbook designers. This case is nearly similar to the speech act of making suggestions. Based on the percentages, 24% of the whole responses were appropriate. The lack of using good strategies, as it was mentioned earlier, was the main hindrance. Hence, there might be an urgent call for an explicit instruction to teach and afford the learners with the appropriate strategies in formal contexts. This fact may lead us to rethink unconsciously of the dichotomy acquiring-learning pragmatic competence. In the same context, the percentages obtained on the speech acts of inviting and offering are relatively lesser than the speech acts of making suggestions and helping. Only 21% and 23% respectively of the whole responses were appropriate. Lack of proficiency and negative pragmatic transfer were the main reasons behind this failure.

Complaining and criticizing are two functions which have a critical status in pragmatic competence. They can contribute greatly in tracing the development of human relationships. These functions are considered as face-threatening acts par excellence as they threaten the positive face of the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Accordingly, the percentage obtained on the speech act of complaining is very low 12%. Lack of proficiency and negative pragmatic transfer hampered massively the respondents' performance. The percentage obtained on the speech act of criticizing is 19%. The problems which faced the respondents regarding this function are nearly the same as with complaining.

6. Conclusion

To wrap up, it is palpable that speech act knowledge has a central role in developing EFL learners' communicative competence. However, the findings of this article raise a big question mark about the problems facing Moroccan EFL advanced learners. Because of the urgent need for developing learning foreign languages in Moroccan higher education specifically English language, it is of a great importance to reconsider practically the necessary modifications of the scientific methods used to learn and teach English language at the Moroccan university.

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